

## "A Stage of Adolescence":

### American Literature and Culture in the 1920s and 1930s.

Thafer Y. Assarairah \*

#### Abstract

This paper argues that the decades of the twenties and thirties can be considered as a period of "adolescence" in the development of American literature and culture. In particular, this study examines the works of some American writers of these two decades (such as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Frost, Cummings, Stevens, Williams and others) to note how the works of these authors reflect and, to some extent, influence this developmental "stage."

**Keywords:** American Literature, American Culture, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature.

الأدب والثقافة الأمريكية في العشرينيات والثلاثينيات من القرن العشرين

ظافر يوسف الصرايرة

#### ملخص

يناقش هذا البحث فكرة اعتبار حقبتَي العشرينيات والثلاثينيات في القرن العشرين كمرحلة "مراهقة" في مسيرة وتطور الأدب والثقافة الأمريكية. كما يدرس هذا البحث على وجه الخصوص أعمال عدد من الكتاب الأمريكيين الذين كتبوا في هاتين الحقبتين (مثل كتابات فيتزجيرالد، هيمنغواي، فوكنر، شتاينبيك، فروست، كمينكس، ستيفنس، ووليامز بالإضافة إلى بعض الكتاب الآخرين) للتعرف على كيفية قيام أعمال هؤلاء الكتاب بعكس هذه المرحلة الانتقالية والتأثير عليها إلى حد ما.

الكلمات الدالة: الثقافة الأمريكية، الأدب في القرن العشرين.

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\* قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة مؤتة، مؤتة، الكرك.

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From the earliest period of European colonization of America and at least through the beginning of the twentieth century, Europeans have tended toward the belief that America was lacking a sufficient history and civilization to be considered a seriously separate entity. Therefore, European scholars and critics have doubted the validity and depth of American literature. To some extent, these scholars and critics entertain a valid opinion, since America itself began with many befuddled notions of cultural and philosophical backgrounds, disregarding and destroying the cultures and histories already present in this "New World." In the longer view, however, the rational and historically educated critic must disagree with such a dismissal of America as a nation possessed of no history, motivational spirit, and blended, yet cohesive, philosophical nature. As nations go, America is a "being," and all beings are possessed of such natural cycles as gestation, birth, developing maturity, and old age. America may then be usefully compared to a human being, primarily since it is composed of humans and since its collective behavior is comparable to the behavior of a living, growing human.

Like most attempted analogies, a seamless analogy between life and literature is nearly impossible to sustain. Nevertheless, one who contemplates both the progress of the American nation and the development of American literature, may hardly be blamed for perceiving the making of such an analogy. The comparison between national, literary, and human development is almost unbearably tempting. Writers and politicians have repeatedly referred to the early decades of the American nation as its infancy. Following the same train of thought, one can then consider American's colonial period as its gestation, and might further expand the analogy past the travail and birth trauma of the late eighteenth century, through the childhood of the nineteenth century, into the adolescence of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and into the young adulthood of the middle twentieth century. By following such reasoning, one might assume that both that nation and its literature have navigated the turbulent rapids of "coming of age" and have entered a semi-complacent middle age, but the truth may not be quite so simple, for history and literature, unlike most human beings, require a very long time to develop. Furthermore, commentators of the twenties were happy for the country's coming of age through the trials of

civil war and WWI, and that happiness was obviously premature, as the Great Depression of the thirties and the advent of WW II were to prove.

From the perspective of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, then, the hypothetical literary and historical philosopher may experience the startling revelation that Americans and America may not have matured nearly as much as Americans would prefer to believe. In point of fact, that period of adolescence may still trouble the flow of American manners and matters, as they only proceed into adulthood. If such a revised perspective is indeed the more solid one, then the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century would possibly more truly represent the "pre-teen" years, the swiftly fluctuating perceptions and behaviors of adolescence. The literary expressions of those decades, therefore, would seem to reflect the mixed and troubled perceptions of the individual members of that newly adolescent organism called America.

There should no longer be a question as to whether or not America has a literature of its own. It does, and it is an old one, notwithstanding the comment of Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury that, "Just two hundred years ago, ...there was American writing, but there was no American literature" (xi). Without doubt, American literature was greatly influenced by that of Europe and England from the times of exploration and colonization, but today's anthologists have broadened their borders of inclusion and conceded that American literature begins with the oral traditions which existed prior to that colonization and now includes the notable work of all the various cultures which compose the body of America itself. Walt Whitman, whose "I Hear America Singing" and "Song of Myself" boldly assert their Americanness, declaims that:

America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and kosmical... It must bend its vision toward the future, more than the past. Like America, it must extricate itself from even the greatest models of the past... Erect, inflated, and fully self-esteeming be the chant; and then America will listen with pleased ears. (193)

While Whitman speaks specifically of poetry, his perspective on the proper direction for American literature is probably correct. Certainly, readers of Whitman and those who succeeded him could have little doubt

that not only America, but also American literature, had been born and had established a truly personal identity. Ruland and Bradbury also note that, "D. H. Lawrence was one of the first non-Americans to acknowledge the validity of American literature as a separate entity" (275), and thus one may consider that, no matter what the state of development of American culture may be at any given time, its literature at least is recognizable as a being of some sort.

At the beginning of the twenties, Americans were happy for their industrial development, their plentiful resources, and their successful conclusion of the only world war they believed they would ever see. Some of the writers of the period took part in this, while others perceived the incongruity of the situation. In the foreword to Charles Angoff's The Tone of The Twenties, Thomas Yoseloff notes, however, that, "As interpreters of the political and social scene, on a profound level, the literary heroes of the twenties proved themselves almost without exception to be hopelessly incapable" (10). In what seems to be an assertion of the adolescent nature of the period, Yoseloff refers to "the insouciance of the time, the hedonism that has been celebrated in songs and plays and books and movies" (10). Yet Yoseloff also seems to subscribe to the "coming of age" myth when he states, "Serious fiction, the serious theatre, critical writing—all these had reached their zenith, a peak which has never since been surpassed" (11). Perhaps, since he speaks from the perspective of the sixties, he may be declaring what, at that time, seemed to be truth, but such a statement hardly holds true, since worthwhile literature seems to have been revived in the works of such postmodern authors as Paul Auster, Jane Smiley, Edward Abbey, Louise Erdrich, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Toni Morrison, to name a very few. In the sixties, after all, Yoseloff protests that, "Today there is more money available, our average income and gross national product are greater, life abounds in greater luxury than in the twenties—yet nobody can really quite believe in today's prosperity as we believed in that of the twenties" (10). In other words, since the twenties Americans have undergone several reality checks, and have, it is hoped, learned a few lessons on road to maturity.

That other illusions abounded in the America of the twenties is also clear from examining other aspects of its cultural dynamic. From our

present perspective, we might note some rather eerie points of comparison between the mentality of the twenties and the mentality of the sixties. Yoseloff declares that the twenties "was an age of personal freedom, when the individual emerged as paramount in the American social scheme" (11). He also asserts, ironically, that "America had come of age, and the promise of its constitution seemed assured" (11). Such authors as Sinclair Lewis seem to subscribe to this view of American society, as his Main Street (1920) illustrates. For Lewis, and for Sherwood Anderson in Winesburg, Ohio (1919), the small town life of the early twentieth century is a stultifying one, anachronistic in a time of big city culture and industry. Ruland and Bradbury note that, in 1920, "Sinclair Lewis published Main Street, which prefigured the new decade by satirizing the transition of the old pioneer West into dullness, boosterism and vulgarity that thought small-town main street the center of civilization" (274). The problem here is that, while 1920s Americans have become jaded, their vulgarity may be more reflected by their conviction that culture and truth are most likely to be found in the confusion of large industrial cities than by their (doubtful) acceptance of small town superiority.

Oddly enough, many of the characteristics of life and of people in the twenties and thirties could still be considered applicable today, a fact which calls to mind the phrase, "one step forward and two steps back." In a discussion of Lewis, Charles Angoff quotes an unnamed former mistress of Mussolini as saying:

American men lack tenderness. American writers lack it even more. Even your women writers lack it... Sinclair Lewis is wholly lacking in emotion. I mean he is sorry for people, he doesn't feel gentleness toward them, no tenderness. Dreiser is a little better. Only a little... But... Lewis understands women least of all, except maybe Hemingway, who knows just nothing, nothing at all, about women, shockingly nothing. (72)

In general, her commentary on Lewis seems quite accurate, except in terms of his understanding of women. On the contrary, his understanding of a certain variety of American women seems quite clear, although almost clinical. His heroine in Main Street is astoundingly shallow, but

he seems to sympathize with her far more than the circumstances warrant.

Furthermore, Theodore Dreiser is not lacking in sympathy, but his sympathy seems misdirected. In An American Tragedy (1925), he apparently propounds Clyde Griffiths as his "tragic hero," but it is difficult for anyone with a classical sense of tragedy and a mature sense of morality to perceive tragedy in this tale, at least for its protagonist. Clyde's story seems to be no more than an extended apologetic for the most adolescent behavior—the urgent desire for what one does not have and the rash destruction of all obstacles to that abstract "happiness," whether those obstacles be things, circumstances, or people. Dreiser's description of Clyde's dilemma is thus:

And so disturbed was he by the panorama of the bright world of which Sondra was the center and which was now at stake, that he could scarcely think clearly. Should he lose all this for such a world as he and Roberta could provide for themselves—a small home—a baby, such a routine work-a-day life as taking care of her and a baby on such a salary as he could earn, and from which most likely he would never again be freed! God! A sense of nausea seized him. (449)

If this story is indeed a tragedy, Clyde is not its hero; perhaps the American male is, in a symbolic way. At any rate, Dreiser would seem more sympathetic to "poor Clyde" than to Roberta, or even to Sondra, so his understanding of women would indeed appear flawed.

The quoted analysis of Hemingway in Angoff's remarks seems inaccurate, although characteristic of much of the critical commentary on Hemingway's work extends into the present time. C. W. E. Bigsby notes that Hemingway's "characters want to live 'without consequences' and if, in a sense, Hemingway's world was perpetually frozen in the youthful Mid-Western all-male society of his own past—a society of permanent adolescence in which experience is indeed without consequence—it is because complexity as such threatens a potentially disastrous loss of control" (205). While such a statement subscribes to the theory of adolescence, however, it may well be a too-simplistic diagnosis of

Hemingway's themes and motives. Joseph Warren Beach insists that Hemingway's "social consciousness was not an a priori assumption, a matter of literary ideology. It was the slow growth of experience and observation, observation both of himself and his own reactions, and of certain types of people and behavior for which he felt a special affinity" (70). Beach also notes that Hemingway's characters "are stubbornly determined not to acknowledge their obligations to any system of conduct handed down to them by the professional moralists. They are determined to find out what they think for themselves, and by actual experiment" (76). The lives of Hemingway's characters are intensely symptomatic of adolescence, as any parent of an adolescent should know. An adult, particularly a parent, only wastes breath in an attempt to help a teenager to "learn from my mistakes;" that teenager is only willing to learn from his or her own mistakes, no matter how deeply the parent wishes to spare the child the wounds of experience. Beach declares, "The writer of fiction—if it is Hemingway—is generally trying to render the reactions of characters whose intellectual level is that of the eighth-grade pupil" (101).

We should note that Beach is referring to the intellectual level of the characters and society portrayed by the author, not to that of the author himself. Furthermore, Hemingway's portrayal of American thinking and American people is a realistic one, a reflection of what society itself has become. Ruland and Bradbury note that, "Hemingway himself came to full notice with In Our Time [1925], a collection of linked, hard-edged stories which portrayed the collapse of older confident American ideas among the World War's stockyard piles of corpses" (276). This work, in fact, does portray the adolescent Nick Adams, perhaps a remembrance of Hemingway's former self, perhaps a reflection of most young men of the period, and the stories of war and violence that alternate with Nick's memories provide an ironic counterpoint for them and an indication of the confusion at work in the minds of the people of the time. It can also be stated that the diagnosis of young adolescent mentality is meant to be applied to the twenties and thirties of American culture itself, not to all people alive in those decades and not to the chroniclers of that culture. Nevertheless, many of the writers of the twenties and thirties did manifest certain adolescent traits of their own, although some might say that most novelists seem to be stuck in a permanent cycle of adolescence.

Certainly, Fitzgerald played as hard as did his characters, and the urge to jump into other people's fights without looking—as did Faulkner, Hemingway, and others—is another indication of early youth. The mere act of "running away" to Europe, which defined the entire "expatriate" community of writers is, on one level, a childish one too. In fact, each of the writers of this period has passed through his or her own maturing process as persons and as artists, but each of them has also recorded insights into the collective mind of the culture and period under consideration, and those insights reflect the vacillation and indetermination of an extremely youthful entity.

Some of their most noble protagonists are also examples of the adolescent mindset. In the case of Hemingway's characters, Jake Barnes' wandering from London to Paris to Spain is the wandering of an unsettled youth; although he has been war-wounded in such a way as to preclude any permanent commitment or sexual release, one might conclude that he has also been placed in a state of permanent adolescence. Frederick Henry's love affair with Catherine Barkley is also the rash, "it's now or never" passion of the teenager, with the same consequences that often attend youthful relationships. Faulkner's Quentin Compson, throughout his appearances in The Sound and the Fury and in Absalom, Absalom!, is beset by the same turmoils as many very young men—consumed by guilt, unable to adequately decipher the puzzles around him, yet driven to "know" as much as he can about his world, whether he can endure it or not. In As I Lay Dying, Jewel and Dewey Dell are both troubled with adolescent quandaries: Jewel's turmoil involves his relationship with his mother and legal father, a probable latent realization that he is somehow different from the other children, and his attempts to spend his frustration on his wild, spotted horse. Dewey Dell's revolves around budding sexuality complicated by unwanted pregnancy and the urgent need to eliminate the results of that pregnancy. Darl also reacts as an adolescent, a poetic though demented one. Even Steinbeck's Danny and his irresponsible friends in Tortilla Flat, are Peter Pan characters who don't want to grow up.

The contribution to American society of most of the best authors of the twenties, was that they recognized the period for what it was. Some, of course, did not, such as Lewis, but Robert Frost always observed



seemingly from a distance, and F. Scott Fitzgerald experienced the horror of the delusion of the period, and perceived the chaos which came of it. In analyzing the nature of American culture in the 1920s, Frederick J. Hoffman asserts that:

Many Americans had [previously to the twenties] felt uncomfortably inferior in their attainments of mind... They apologized for their own country on the grounds that it had had no time to develop a culture; or that culture was after all a secondary matter... or that they possessed a high degree of moral probity... This recognition of cultural immaturity was only one aspect of American self-criticism. As for the moral failure, they were aware of that too, but never quite so sharply as was the generation that sought its way out in the 1920s. (5-6)

Ruland and Bradbury claim that, "it was F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby that Eliot called 'the first step the American novel has taken since Henry James'" (276). Of course, Fitzgerald did not produce The Great Gatsby until 1925, by which time his own experience of the twenties' irresponsible hedonism had begun to rise into some part of his consciousness. Edmund Wilson comments that in 1922 Fitzgerald "has been given imagination without intellectual control of it; he has been given the desire for beauty without all aesthetic ideal; and he has been given a gift for expression without very many ideas to express" (27). At the beginning of the twenties, this may have been an accurate assessment of Fitzgerald, but by the middle of the decade, reality had begun to sink in. Increasingly, Fitzgerald examines his own life and the life around him as it happens.

Not surprisingly, Fitzgerald joined the literary exodus to Europe, and, among the expatriates who were already there, he was able to look backward at what was happening in America at the same time as he became caught up in the equally or more fantastic lifestyle of the social and literary scene there. Jay Gatsby himself is a lifelike example of the type of a businessman who began to rise to notice in American society, replacing the "established" culture which had sunk into inaction and begun to decay of its own weight. The "Waste Land" of T. S. Eliot was a real place, as Warren French notes when he declares that classical literary

tradition had declined "in the United States before World War I as classical studies were dethroned by the 'business interests' that supported our universities and looked upon them as training grounds for a future managerial class rather than as Brahmin refuges" (1). The twentieth century decay of European culture actually makes more sense than that of American culture, if one takes into account the weight of history, but American culture was actually only decaying in part; that is, certain aspects of American culture which had been assimilated from European culture were the casualties of the twenties and thirties. Like any adolescent, America was at a point of developing its own personality and values, independent of those of its parents.

The shift in emphasis from classical and "moral" values to business and financial values in America is a logical, if deplorable and shattering, one. In an essay reprinted in John Oliver Perry's Backgrounds to Modern Literature, Hoffman notes that, "The Twenties were ... years that followed one great form of modern disaster and proceeded another" (59). Perhaps it should be no surprise that poets of the time were apparently the first to perceive what was wrong with society and what its destination might be. Following Eliot's 1921 dirge for The Waste Land which he found in Western society, Wallace Stevens advises in 1923, with a certain cynical logic:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.  
Take the moral law and make a nave of it  
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,  
The conscience is converted into palms,  
...But take  
The opposing law and make a peristyle,  
And from the peristyle project a masque  
Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness.  
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last.  
Is equally converted into palms,  
Squiggling like saxophones. (Baym 1147)

Also in 1923, he declares that "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" (Baym 1148). William Carlos Williams prefers to poeticize nature and sex in the twenties, but perhaps his commentary on "The Red Wheelbarrow" may be perceived as a lament for the trivialization of American life; and, by 1927, the bleak vision of "The Dead Baby" could be seen as a commentary upon the desensitization of society, particularly as he designates the baby "a white model of our lives/ a curiosity--/ surrounded by fresh flowers" (Baym 1191). Perhaps, too, his exhortation in this poem to "Sweep the house clean," could be applied to the "house" of society. Meanwhile, Ezra Pound, spent both decades writing The Cantos, in a futile attempt to return to classicism.

Robinson Jeffers cuts more directly to the heart of the trouble with American society, as does Edna St. Vincent Millay, although Jeffers' approach is more escapist than Millay's. In "Shine Perishing Republic" (1925), Jeffers states unequivocally, "While this America settles in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to empire, / and protest, only a bubble in the molten mass, pops and sighs out, and the mass hardens,/ I sadly smiling remember that the flower fades to make fruit, the fruit rots to make earth." Although he recognizes that the "vulgarity" and "rot" of the time are necessary to the growth of the national being, yet he is cautious of involvement in it, declaring, "But for my children, I would have them keep their distance from the thickening center; corruption/ Never has been compulsory, when the cities lie at the monster's feet there are left the mountains" (Baym 1242-43). By the end of the twenties, in "November Surf" he hoped for a cataclysmic purging of the nation:

I think this cumbered continent envies its cliff then. . . But all seasons

The earth, in her childlike prophetic sleep,

Keeps dreaming of the bath of a storm that prepares up the long coast

Of the future to scour more than her sea-lines:

The cities gone down, the people fewer and the hawks more numerous,

The rivers mouth to source pure; when the two-footed

Mammal, being someways one or the nobler animals, regains  
The dignity of room, the value of rareness. (Baym 1244)

Early in the decade, Millay seems much a part of carefree "flapper" culture, which she was. In 1922's "Recuerdo," Millay captures the essence of twenties city life:

We were very tired, we were very merry –

We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.

It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable –

...

We hailed, "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered head,

And bought a morning paper which neither of us read;

And she wept, "God bless you!" for the apples and pears,

And we gave her all our money but our subway fares. (Baym 1438)

The new freedom of the woman of the twenties and the casual nature of the decade's relationships are epitomized in "I Think I Should have Loved You Presently" (1922) and "I, Being Born A Woman" (1923). By the thirties, however, in the midst of Depression and aware of the changing cycle which will result in another world war, she writes her "Apostrophe to Man" (1934), in which her tone has changed entirely, although her directness remains:

Detestable race, continue to expunge yourself, die out.

Breed faster, crowd, encroach, sing hymns, build bombing  
airplanes;

Make speeches, unveil statues, issue bonds, parade;

...

Convert again into putrescent matter drawing flies

The hopeful bodies of the young... (Baym 1439)

The twenties had, after all, been forged in the furnace of war as well as industrialization. It should not be a surprise that the American writers and citizens of 1920s would have been so affected by their experiences than nothing would do but to form a society of pleasure and excess, while at the same time, attempting to formulate a world in which such experiences would not come again. It should not also be a surprise that those individuals alive in the previous decade would have forgotten some of the lessons of earlier American history. As Hoffman notes in his book on the twenties, "Since 1865 Americans had had no real opportunity to test themselves on fields of battle... Young men at Harvard, at Princeton, or in Kansas City were anxious to get to France where guns were booming and armies maneuvering" (51). Hoffman goes on to say, "The large underlying purposes of the war were not real to them ..." (54). In Perry's book, Hoffman considers the later (twenties) results of this rash plunge into war as he declares, "Innocence takes two principal forms in the decade: an intense preoccupation with the immediate present, and the sense or dissociation from larger or deeper orders of experience" (67).

E. E. Cummings also decries the commercialism of America, but his perspective has similar roots to those of Hemingway, Faulkner, and the other new writers of the period whose sensibilities have been forged by experience of World War I and its attendant European conflicts. Certainly, Cummings is most usually regarded as an innovator in poetic style, as well as in the uses (and disuses) of established punctuation, capitalization, and grammar rules and in the form and picture of words themselves. Nevertheless, he also reflects the unease of his time, in such verses as "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls," "Poem, or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal," "next to of course god america i," and "i sing of Olaf glad and big." He attacks old social and intellectual values in "Cambridge ladies" with his descriptions of their "furnished souls" and "comfortable minds," and notes their incongruity when he contrasts their "delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?" with the statement that:

... The Cambridge ladies do not care, above  
Cambridge if sometimes in its box of  
sky lavender and cornerless, the  
moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy. (Baym 1451)

In "Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal," Cummings illustrates America's commercialism through the juxtaposition of popular brand names with references to art and poesy. He also mourns the dehydrated soul-lessness of such a "civilization" whose citizens are "tensetendoned and with/ upward vacant eyes, painfully/ perpetually crouched, quivering, upon the/ sternly allotted sandpile" (Baym 1453). His "Olaf" is "a conscientious object-or" who dies in a dungeon (Baym 1454), and the irony of patriotic soldiering is portrayed in "next to of course god" by "these heroic happy dead/ who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter/ they did not stop to think they died instead" (Baym 1453). The transition from Cummings' train of thought to Eliot's gloomy 1925 prediction that "This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper" (Baym 1285), is not a difficult one to make.

Of course, the world economy collapsed in 1929, and, most notably for Americans, the Great Depression began. As Hoffman notes in Perry's book, the twenties "ended in a financial crisis, which proved subsequently also to have been a moral crisis" (61). The whole matter of American cultural and literary development transcends the neat packaging of writers' individual ages, or even the stereotypical "clumping together" of generations. This two-decade period is marked by the same fluctuations between maturity and childishness that mark the early adolescent stage of human growth. Adolescents exist in a state of perpetual confusion. They have lost the intuitiveness of childhood but are a long way from gaining the wisdom of experience. They fully believe that they know whatever there is to be known, but that which they "know" is ephemeral and often untrue. They crave possessions, comfort, freedom, and notice, but the notice which they achieve is often due to their destruction of possessions, comfort, and freedom. The politics of the world had become divided during the tens and twenties, but the differences between political right and left were to become much more noticeable in the thirties, in literature as well as in social commentary. Changes between the two decades were, of course, not confined to economic and social collapse, but extended to literature, and, as Ruland and Bradbury note, "The 1930s brought attacks on stylistic experiment from both right and left and the Modernist movement seemed over in a time of pressing troubles" (277-78).



whose words will

bite

their way

home—being actual

having the form

of motion. (Baym 1192)

T. S. Eliot was no longer so bitter, having found his answer in the Christianity he had earlier scorned, and other poets were entering the scene to provide a new perspective.

Others, such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Steinbeck, did not find their way so easily or clearly, however. Philip Rahv, like many critics of the period and since, tended to misread or misunderstand them, or to wave them off with a dismissive air. Rahv declares:

There is nothing Hemingway dislikes more than experience of a make-believe, vague, or frigid nature, but in order to safeguard himself against the counterfeit he consistently avoids drawing upon the more abstract resources of the mind, he snubs the thinking man and mostly confines himself to the depiction of life on its physical levels. (219)

Edmund Wilson looks at the matter in another way entirely when he postulates that:

Indeed, Miss Stein, Mr. Anderson and Mr. Hemingway may now be said to form a school by themselves. The characteristic of this school is a naiveté of language, often passing into the colloquialism of the character dealt with, which serves actually to convey profound emotions and complex states of mind. It is a distinctively American development in prose—as opposed to more or less successful American achievements in the traditional style or English prose. (119-20)



Rahv, of course, is right about Hemingway's objection to "counterfeit" experience, but he misses Hemingway's mode and meaning almost entirely. The physical level is certainly there, in A Farewell to Arms (1929), in The Sun Also Rises (1926), in "The Snows of Killimanjaro" (1936), and in all of his work, but the emotional and "thinking" levels are there also. The editors of The Norton Anthology of American Literature note that Hemingway "brought more to his writing than disillusionment or cynicism—he brought an ever-vivid sense of betrayal" (Baym 1633). Who can deny the tragic aspects of Lady Brett Ashley and Jake Barnes in The Sun Also Rises, or of Frederick Henry and Catherine Barkley in A Farewell to Arms? Even the jaded Harry of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" is tragic in a sense, and his wasted and forever lost ability to write provides a cautionary tale, not only for writers, but also for the adolescent America which has allowed its youth to pass in carousal and disaffectedness rather than learning its lessons in time to save itself. Fitzgerald is as disillusioned as Hemingway by the transition between twenties and thirties, as he clearly shows in Tender Is the Night (1934). Dick Diver is both destroying himself and attempting to redeem himself through his relationship with the young Rosemary, a counterplay which translates into a perfect image of Gertrude Stein's "Lost Generation."

Faulkner's world, from the late twenties throughout the thirties, is another world entirely different from those of the other authors discussed here. His American south has, of course, bypassed adolescence and young adulthood and proceeded directly to a degenerate late middle age. This is a reasonable progression, for its childhood was, for its white upper class, already past in Europe, and its black, half-caste, and white lower-class population are, in the twenties and thirties, still captive in that childhood. The Civil War may be seen as having put a stop to anything remotely resembling a normally maturing society in the South, and returning it to something more primal even than infancy—to chaos from which an individual consciousness has yet to spring. And Faulkner provides that consciousness. Most critics fasten upon Faulkner's creation of a county and two family dynasties as the defining image of his work, and that fascination is reasonable, but Faulkner has done more than create semi-imaginary places and families. He has created a symbolic "being" for the South, and in the space of two decades, he has brought it to a consciousness of itself and to the consciousness of the rest of the

country and the world. As noted by critics, Faulkner's literary purposes were dictated more by salability than by literary integrity; in other words, the commercialism of America had enveloped Faulkner too. Certainly, commercial success was a driving force in the composition of the shocking Sanctuary (1931), Faulkner's venture into "popular" fiction. Such works as The Sound and the Fury (1929), As I Lay Dying (1930), and Absalom, Absalom! (1936), however, are not only innovative literature, but also deep insights into the Southern and the American mind. They examine the motivations and mental processes of their characters and expose the racism and class-consciousness of entire generations.

The latest of the novelists of the period to be discussed in this paper is John Steinbeck. In fact, the chief difference between Faulkner and Steinbeck—aside from style—is the difference in relationship between time and tale. Faulkner meanders throughout an entire epoch, while Steinbeck writes about what is happening in his world at the time. Steinbeck's first well-recognized work is Tortilla Flat, published in 1935, and, along with Cup of Gold (1929), The Pastures of Heaven (1932), To A God Unknown (1933), and The Long Valley (1938), it is evocative of larger and older mythic themes than are his later works. Further, to a large extent, Tortilla Flat and The Pastures of Heaven in particular being reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and Faulkner's own As I Lay Dying, as well as of the medieval story cycle which entranced Steinbeck.

In producing In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937), and The Grapes of Wrath (1939), however, Steinbeck became involved in the issues of the time. Reviewers, critics, and politicians were caught off guard and began to attach spurious and conflicting motives to Steinbeck's work. These trends—Steinbeck's writing about the real world around him and the world's misconstruing of his motives—were to extend throughout the forties, fifties and sixties, even past Steinbeck's death in 1968. However, the relevance of his work to his time was noticed and so must have been his contribution to world consciousness-raising, for he was awarded the Nobel Prize, even though that was credited to The Grapes of Wrath alone and that work remains the most recognized, if not necessarily the most important, of his works until the present. Steinbeck

perceives and portrays the conditions of his world from the standpoint of group consciousness; and, to some extent, Fitzgerald and Faulkner do also, in that they focus on the behaviors of "types" of people. Hemingway, however, depicts the characteristics of individuals, and allows those individuals to speak for the personality and values of the time.

Steinbeck's work, as well as the work of Faulkner and Hemingway, extended well beyond the thirties, as did the work of a number of the poets mentioned previously. Robert Frost, however, more or less quietly maintained his literary output from 1913 through the fifties, and remains, most likely, the best-loved poet of the twentieth century. Much of his poetry throughout his literary life is concerned with themes of nature and individuals, but much of it also draws sardonic parallels between the world of nature and the world of civilization, as well as the internal workings of the human mind. William Carlos Williams' "The Dead Baby" is eerily evocative of Frost's "Home Burial," and countless poets of the remaining twentieth century have been influenced in one way or another by Frost's themes and style. Like other poets, Frost seems to have a gift for prophecy in "Fire and Ice," (1923), where he declares that if the world "had to perish twice, / I think I know enough of hate/ To say that for destruction ice/ Is also great/ And would suffice" (Baym 1105). Did he foresee a Cold War? The economic and spiritual depression of the nation seems to be portrayed later in his "Provide, Provide" (1934), particularly in the sardonic lines, "Better to go down dignified/ With boughten friendship at your side/ Than none at all. Provide, Provide!" (Baym 1112). Angoff quotes Theodore Green on the occasion of a "Meet the Press" as saying, "There was only one honest man on the platform, Robert Frost" (64). Suffice it to say that Frost, like the other authors of his time, reflected the adolescent progress of his nation, whether or not he influenced it.

The conclusion of this study would seem to be a question as to whether or not America has matured significantly beyond the adolescent stage. Philip Rahv has made at least one perceptive statement on the matter, although he may be mistaken in his guiding premise in this remark as well as in his other ideas. In his essay on "The Cult of Experience in American Writing," he declares:

The creative power of the cult of experience is almost spent, but what lies beyond it is still unclear. One thing, however, is certain: whereas in the past, throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, the nature of American literary life was largely determined by national forces, now it is international forces that have begun to exert a dominant influence. (231)

On the surface, this seems an unnecessarily dour and inaccurate pronouncement, since the creative powers of experience is unlikely to ever be spent, but Rahv appears almost as prophetic in his assessment of the shift of dominance. The late-twentieth-century emphasis on cultural awareness and diversity sometimes seems overdone, but it is also a symptom of increased maturity—the maturity of the social and literary body. It draws together the scattered expressions of adolescent experience and compacts them into usable forms. The future of American literature remains to be seen.

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